

What is important about the vowels is their “timbre”, “colouring” (we usually say “vowel quality”). Of course you have to do the right thing with your tongue and lips to get the vowel quality you need, but it is difficult to follow instructions as you might with a “th” and get the right sound automatically. It is really a matter of trial and error, matching the things you do with your mouth to the sound that you hear. So you have to listen carefully and get a clear picture in your mind of the sound you need to produce. You can be fairly certain that the first time you do the right thing and get the right sound, it will feel strange because your mouth is just not used to doing it, and is sending indignant signals to your brain to say that it is in an unusual position. So there will be conflicting information going to your brain. Your ears will pick up the sound and – if you have made yourself familiar with the vowel you want to learn to produce properly – send a positive message, while your vocal organs will be protesting.

Infobox

When you read this, you may think: “I have no idea what they are trying to say!” One of the many problems with learning pronunciation is the change of perspective that is necessary. You start thinking about things that you have taken for granted. Part of the aim of this book is to give you some guidance in how to think (and listen, and feel). Observing your vocal organs and listening to the sounds produced may not come easy, but do not give up. Keep trying to fit what you observe yourself with what we are trying to express.

To put it another way: If you pronounce the English words *star*, *shock* and *band* – which have all been imported into German (*Star*, *Schock*, *die Band*) – and your English pronunciation feels familiar and comfortable, then *your alarm bells should be ringing*, because this is an indication that you are not modifying your articulation to make the *phonetic* distinction between the English and German pronunciation, and you are almost certainly producing them with a German accent!

So, we can say that your ears lead the way when you learn vowels, and your mouth has to be persuaded to do the right thing!